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ABSTRACT

Since 1992, Maine has received National Science Foundation Statewide Systemic Initiative (SSI) program monies. SSI is a model for improvement of mathematics and science education based on systemic reform. The SSI initiative in Maine has created seven "Beacon School" sites that vary in size and location including high poverty areas, urban areas, and rural areas. Each site is supported by a grant of $50,000 per year for 5 years plus two full-time on-site facilitators. In view of Maine's long history of local control of education, this study examined whether the SSI program influenced nine local school boards responsible for Beacon School sites to change policies, agendas, or behaviors. School board policy audits examined the adopted date of new or revised policies and analyzed current policies related to organizational structure, decision making, resources, professional development, and instruction. Secondly, a review of school board minutes from prior to project implementation through the first 2 project years examined what issues were addressed and what kind of decisions or actions took place. Data indicate that the SSI program impacted local policy makers as evidenced by a decrease in budget actions and an increase in personnel and academic/curriculum actions at board meetings; an increase in the number of policies adopted or revised related to communication, decision making, and instruction; and increased board interest and time spent discussing the Beacon project and systemic change. The findings suggest that school boards can be responsive to programs supportive of systemic change and that boards themselves, through their policy-setting mandates, can play a positive role in engendering systemic change. Includes data tables. (LP)

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SYSTEMIC CHANGE AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS

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Systemic Change and the Role of School Boards

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Introduction

Maine has been the recipient of National Science Foundation Statewide Systemic Initiative (SSI) program monies since 1992. Maine's "Beacon Schools" project is, as are the other 20 funded projects, based on a general model of change called systemic reform.

This model, as applied specifically here to mathematics and science education, envisions a set of ambitious learning goals for students, significant changes over time in teaching and instruction, and collaboration and leadership at state, regional, and local levels. In essence, climate changes both within the larger community and within individual schools are expected and supported.

The SSI initiative in Maine created seven "Beacon School" sites. Some sites are multidistrict. The sites are scattered throughout the state, vary considerably in size, are on the coast, in high poverty areas, near population centers, and in very rural areas. Each site is supported by a grant of $50,000.00 per year (for 5 years) plus two full-time, on-site facilitators. Extensive additional staff development opportunities for teachers are also available.

The long-term sustainability of changes produced by the infusion of resources is, of course, of concern. The history of American education is of recurring cycles of reform. Educational reform operates on three levels—policy, administration, and practice. Each level has its own special set of dilemmas and its own view of not only how educational reform works but how the system works.

However, in states like Maine with a long history of local control, school boards, through policy development, set the conditions for effective administration and practice. Even though the role of the school board in educational reform is little understood, most agree that the support or

nonsupport of the board is significant to whatever reforms are undertaken (First, 1992; Elmore and McLaughlin, 1988).

School boards are empowered constitutionally and statutorily to make decisions and establish policies for the school system. Local school boards powers are those conferred upon it by the legislature. In order for any actions by a school board to be considered legal, it must transpire in an official board meeting which itself conforms to law. These policies and decisions become the blueprint from which others develop plans, goals, and objectives, and/or rules, regulations, and procedures to implement the accepted policies and decisions.

It is well known that local school boards face many internal and external pressures. There is the ever increasing influence from the federal government, state governments, interstate networks and coalitions, private business coalitions, teacher and administrative collective bargaining units and community issues groups. As Kirst states, "The discretionary decision zone of the local superintendent and school board has become squeezed progressively into a smaller and smaller area during the last two decades" (Kirst, 1989, p. 67). In fact, school boards have been under unprecendented attack, including questions as to the need for their continued existence, and the observation that school boards spend inordinate amounts of time on insignificant or trivial issues (Kirst, 1989; Lewis, 1988; Nowakowski & First, 1989). Chester Finn, a former federal official, even goes so far as to state that school boards are "a dinosaur left over from the agrarian past." Albert Shanker calls for them to be remolded in the manner of hospital boards (Kirst, 1989, p. 74). Others see school boards as an important and functional link in the governance of education (Kirst, 1989). Even though school boards are deeply embedded in our local culture, they are receiving little support and seem to be neglected players in school reform (Nowakowski & First, 1989).

Objectives and Methodology

The purpose of this research was to determine if the introduction of the SSI initiative influenced local school boards to the point that they changed policies, agendas, and/or behaviors

in ways which reflect the statewide systemic initiative.

The research was conducted in two steps: First, a school board policy audit was conducted. This included the adopted date of new or revised policies; specific analyses of current policies related to: organizational structure, decision making, resources, professional development, instruction and finally any policies that demonstrate articulation with the state of Maine.

Second, we examined the work of school boards by looking at what takes place at board meetings, what issues are addressed, and what kind of decisions or actions are taken. A review of school board minutes and agendas was undertaken for school years 1990-91, 1991-92, 1992-93, and 1993-94. This time frame starts just prior to boards approving the application process for the systemic change initiative, the development of the application, and the first two years of the project. The researchers used a qualitative research design consisting of emergent category analysis of the minutes to identify common categories. For an action to be counted, it must have been an item on the agenda that was addressed at the board meeting evidenced by the minutes. The items were ones the board addressed, discussed, and/or made decisions on. Excluded were items that were solely for information with no expected discussion or action of the board. This most typically was in the form of administrative updates or reports.

From this process the following categories were identified: Personnel (actions related to contracts, hiring, resignations, transfers, evaluation, and discipline); *Budget* (budget development, leases, grants, and building projects); *Board Approval* (use of facilities, field trips, school calendar, tuition students); *Academic/Curriculum* (actions related to the development of curriculums, grading, assessment, programs, and instruction); and *Policy* (policy, procedures development, and adoption).

Nine school systems are included in the analysis. Results are compiled by site and collectively.

Results

There are observable trends in school board policymaking and how boards spend their time which suggest that in these systems the Beacon Schools Systemic Change Initiative is impacting local policymakers.

While there is considerable variation within the sites, summary data suggests that:

1. Over the past 4 years school boards' actions related to personnel, budget, and academic/curriculum combine to make 90% of all board activities. There is a trend that budget actions are decreasing and personnel and academic/curriculum actions are increasing.
2. Five of the nine systems in the past 2 years spent 6-14% more time on academic/curriculum issues. We view this trend of more attention to personnel and academic curriculum topics as very appropriate to enhancing the instructional process. Good people make a school system.
3. An average of two-thirds (66%) of all policies adopted or revised in the past 4 years related to communication, decision making, and instruction and for six of the sites the greatest number was in the area of instruction. We suggest this demonstrates school board and superintendent attention to systemic change initiatives.
4. In all sites there is evidence of board interest in the Beacon project. In the past 2 years the range is from 6 to 31 times that the Beacon project was an item on the agenda (X = 12). At a minimum each board spent some time on this project at least every 2 or 3 months during the past 2 years.

The nine school boards studied here averaged over 24 meetings a year. Approximately 30% of the time of all boards was spent addressing personnel actions; 30% on budget management actions; and 30% on academic/curriculum and student actions. The remaining 10%

was on issues requiring school board approval and policy development. For the nine sites there was a low of 0% and a high of 9.5% of time spent on policy development ($\overline{X}$ = 3.4%)

The range in number of written policies was from 263 to 437. During the analysis it became evident that many staff, in-service training and professional development issues have been removed from policy manuals and are now incorporated in comprehensive (labor) contracts. Policies that remain now address nonbargainable issues which have remained the province of school boards.

It was evident that policies under consideration in the 1990s tended to address different issues than those adopted earlier. The older policies tended to describe the roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the various elements of the school system: school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, bus drivers, etc. They also tended to define the limits of involvement with the various elements of the community as well as defining limits with regard to student discipline and activities. The more recently adopted policies reflect a changing society and society's concern with equal treatment, a healthy environment, harassment, etc. These later policies do establish rules and regulations, but they also define various aspects of the curriculum and the delivery of those programs.

Implications

School boards can make a difference. In a study that compared successful with less successful districts as measured by student achievement it was reported ". . . that many of the policies and initiatives were similar across all boards," however, more successful boards, ". . . were considerably more knowledgeable about district programs and practices," " . . . had a clearer sense on what they wanted to accomplish based on a set of values and beliefs," and "engaged in activities which articulated these values and beliefs." (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991, p. 245)

We have evidence here that school boards can be responsive to programs supportive of systemic change and that the boards themselves, through their policy-setting mandates, can be positive players in engendering systemic change.

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Table 1
Pre-Post 1990 Board Policy Patterns in Beacon School Sites

	Pre 1990		Post 1990	
Area	N ($\bar{X}$)	%	N ($\bar{X}$)	%
Organizational Structure	79.5	27.5	14.2	18.0
Decision Making	49.5	16.6	13.4	19.2
Resources	53.3	17.7	10.0	13.7
Professional Development	2.7	0.9	1.2	1.3
Instruction	71.0	23.3	20.1	27.5
Articulation with State	4.9	1.6	1.4	1.9
Communication	37.8	12.5	11.6	16.2

Table 2
Summary of Beacon Sites' Policies Related to Organizational Structure and Regulations

	Pre '90	% of Total	Post '90	% of Total	Total Policies	% of Total
MSAD #75	61	24.1	25	23.6	86	24.0
Scarborough	85	29.0	5	14.0	90	27.0
MSAD #3	93	32.0	31	22.0	124	21.8
School Union #98	78	22.5	8	17.0	86	22.0
Brunswick	59	33.0	22	25.6	81	30.9
MSAD #59	65	25.0	5	11.0	70	23.1
York	106	21.3	8	18.6	114	21.2
MSAD #29	89	32.9	10	12.0	99	28.0
Average for Sites	79.5	27.5	14.2	18.0	93.75	24.7

For all nine sites approximately 25% of the policies relate to organizational structure and regulation. The range is a high of 31% (Brunswick) and low of 21% (York).

In comparing policies prior to 1990, there is a slight decrease in the percentage of policies related to organization/structure and regulation in 1994.

Table 3
Summary of Beacon Sites' Policies Related to Decision Making

	Pre '90	% of Total	Post '90	% of Total	Total Policies	% of Total
MSAD #75	39	15.4	21	23.6	60	24.0
Scarborough	50	17.0	10	27.0	60	18.0
MSAD #3	37	13.0	23	16.0	60	14.0
School Union #98	81	22.4	8	17.0	89	21.8
Brunswick	42	24.0	17	20.0	59	22.4
MSAD #59	36	14.0	6	13.0	42	13.9
York	82	16.5	9	20.9	91	16.9
MSAD #29	29	10.7	13	15.7	42	11.9
Average for Sites	49.5	16.6	13.375	19.2	62.9	17.9

Approximately 18% of all policies relate to decision making, the range being a high of 22.4% or 59 policies for Brunswick. Union #98, Bar Harbor/MDI, have 89 policies or 27.8%, the low being MSAD #29, Houlton, 42 policies approximately 12%.

In the last 4 years for all nine sites, approximately 25% of all policies adopted or revised related to decision making, with MSAD #75 at 23.6% for a high and MSAD #29, a low at 15.7%.

There is a slight trend of a greater emphasis on decision making in the last 4 years.

Table 4
Summary of Beacon Sites' Policies Related to Resources

	Pre '90	% of Total	Post '90	% of Total	Total Policies	% of Total
MSAD #75	37	12.9	22	20.8	59	16.4
Scarborough	47	16.0	4	11.0	51	16.0
MSAD #3	40	14.0	12	8.0	52	12.0
School Union #98	76	21.8	10	21.3	86	21.8
Brunswick	22	13.0	8	9.4	30	11.3
MSAD #59	80	31.0	6	13.2	86	28.2
York	76	15.3	4	9.3	80	14.8
MSAD #29	48	17.8	14	16.9	62	17.6
Average for Sites	53.25	17.7	10	13.7	63.25	17.3

Approximately 17% of all policies related to resources, a high of 28.2%, 86 policies for MSAD #59, with Union #98 (Bar Harbor/MDI) with 86 policies and 21.8%, the low being MSAD #3, 52 policies and 12% of the total policies.

In the last 4 years approximately 14% of all policies adopted or revised related to resources, with the most active systems being Union #98 (Bar Harbor/MDI) and MSAD #75.

There was no observable trend or emphasis placed on resources.

Table 5
Summary of Beacon Sites' Policies Related to Professional Development

	Pre '90	% of Total	Post '90	% of Total	Total Policies	% of Total
MSAD #75	2	1.0	5	4.8	7	1.9
Scarborough	2	1.0	0	0.0	2	1.0
MSAD #3	3	1.0	1	1.0	4	1.0
School Union #98	4	1.2	0	0.0	4	0.0
Brunswick	2	1.0	1	1.2	3	1.1
MSAD #59	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
York	5	1.0	0	0.0	5	0.9
MSAD #29	4	1.5	3	3.6	7	2.0
Average for Sites	2.7	0.9	1.2	1.3	4	1.1

Approximately 1% of all policies relate to professional development.

MSAD #29 and MSAD #75 each have 7 policies (approximately 2%). MSAD #59 has no policies that relate to professional development.

In the last 4 years MSAD #75 and MSAD #29 have been the most active for the nine sites by adopting or revising five and three policies respectively.

For all intense and purposes, boards do not designate any significant time other than through the negotiation process in professional development. It should be noted that the reviewers did not analyze the comprehensive contract for professional development.

Table 6
Summary of Beacon Sites' Policies Related to Instruction

	Pre '90	% of Total	Post '90	% of Total	Total Policies	% of Total
MSAD #75	74	30.0	16	16.0	90	25.0
Scarborough	58	20.0	7	19.0	65	21.0
MSAD #3	88	29.0	47	39.0	135	31.0
School Union #98	42	12.0	6	13.0	48	12.0
Brunswick	24	16.0	21	24.0	45	16.0
MSAD #59	66	25.0	23	43.0	89	30.0
York	150	30.2	15	34.8	165	30.6
MSAD #29	66	24.4	26	31.3	92	26.1
Average for Sites	71	23.3	20.1	27.5	91.1	23.9

Approximately 24% of all policies related to instruction, with MSAD #3 (135 policies, 31%), York (165 policies, 30.6%), and MSAD #59 (89 policies, 30%). MSAD #29 with (92 policies, 26.1%), and MSAD #75, (90 policies, 25%), are above the average for the nine sites.

In the last 4 years MSAD #59, (23 policies, 43%), MSAD #3 (47 policies, 39%), York (15 policies, 34.8%), and MSAD #29 (26 policies, 31.3%) have been the most active in the area of instruction policies.

For some of the sites, there were major revisions to policies related to special education stimulated by the State Review Success.

In the past 4 years boards are spending more time (27.5% vs. 23.3%) on instruction policies.

Table 7
Summary of Beacon Sites' Policies Related to Articulation with State

	Pre '90	% of Total	Post '90	% of Total	Total Policies	% of Total
MSAD #75	6	2.4	2	2.0	8	2.2
Scarborough	1	1.0	2	5.0	3	1.0
MSAD #3	3	1.0	2	1.0	5	1.0
School Union #98	3	1.0	1	2.0	4	1.0
Brunswick	1	1.0	2	2.4	3	1.1
MSAD #59	0	0.0	1	2.2	1	0.3
York	16	3.2	0	0.0	16	3.0
MSAD #29	9	3.3	1	1.2	10	2.8
Average for Sites	4.9	1.6	1.4	1.9	6.2	1.6

Approximately 2% of all policies relate to articulation with State, York with 16 policies (3%), MSAD #29, 10 policies (2.8%), and MSAD #75, 8 policies (2.2%) are the systems with the most policies.

In the past 4 years very little work has been done in this area.

Regardless of State funds, there is no evidence of efforts to develop policies to open communication between school sites and the Department of Education.

Table 8
Summary of Beacon Sites' Policies Related to Communication

	Pre '90	% of Total	Post '90	% of Total	Total Policies	% of Total
MSAD #75	34	13.4	15	14.2	49	13.6
Scarborough	50	17.0	9	24.0	59	18.0
MSAD #3	31	11.0	19	13.0	50	11.0
School Union #98	63	18.0	10	21.0	73	19.0
Brunswick	27	15.0	15	17.4	42	16.0
MSAD #59	11	4.0	4	9.0	15	5.0
York	61	12.3	5	11.6	66	12.2
MSAD #29	25	9.3	16	19.3	41	11.6
Average for Sites	37.8	12.5	11.6	16.2	49.4	13.3

Approximately 13% of all policies relate to communication. Union #98 (Bar Harbor/MDI) has 73 policies (19% of total, Scarborough with 59 policies (18% of total).

In the last 4 years both Union #98 and Scarborough have been most active in adopting and/or revising policies.

There is a trend to spend more time related to communication policies. There was an increase from an average of 12.5% prior to 1990 to 16.2% the past 4 years.